Folia
Scandinavica
Posnaniensia

Folia Scandinavica
VOL.32, 2022 (p. 19–31)
DOI: 10.14746/fsp-2022.32.02

Stepping from College Classrooms to the Political Front

The Emergence of Feminism in the Norwegian Maoist Movement before 1973

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate the origins of the Women's Front, a women's movement co-founded by Norwegian Maoists in the 1970s. The analysis seeks to capture the dynamics of women's activism in relation to the broader political landscape and, concurrently, to understand the Women's Front in a broader temporal perspective. The sources used were newspapers and publications issued by different branches of the Norwegian Maoist movement. Women's politics are analysed both as a grassroots phenomenon and a part of agitation which emerged under the 1972 anti-EEC campaign. This makes it possible to show how women's politics found a place on the agenda of Norwegian Maoism and what kind of obstacles it had to face on its way to gaining autonomy. The patterns of feminist mobilisation demonstrated by this analysis can make a contribution to the broader debate on the role and place of feminism in traditional political structures.

Keywords: Maoism, student activism, Marxist feminism, second wave feminism, Kvinnefronten

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Women's Front (nor. *Kvinnefronten*, KF), founded in 1972, was one of the so-called new women's movements – groups contesting existing gender relations and feminist achievements – which emerged on the wave of social changes in Norway in the late 1960s. A significant contribution to the organisation was made by Marxist-Leninists associated with the Maoist movement (nor. *ml-bevegelsen*). After 1967, the Maoists gained major influence in student, cultural and solidarity movements, becoming the dominant voice in the local youth revolt. The KF exists to this day despite numerous conflicts and splits, and as such has proved to be one of the most durable projects launched with Maoist involvement.

KF's history has already been described in two major texts – the book *Bak Slagordene: den nye kvinnebevegelsen i Norge* by Runa Haukaa (1982) and the article *Kvinnekamp, imperialisme og monopolkapital. Kvinnefronten i Norge og ml-bevegelsen 1972–1982* by Ole Martin Rønning (2005). The former combines a sociological analysis of the new feminist movements (with a special focus on the KF and the so-called New Feminists[1]) with the personal experiences of its participant. The latter, on the other hand, focused on the period after 1972 and the dynamics of the relationship between the KF and the Maoist movement.

My research focuses on the dynamics of the women's politics in the Maoist movement before 1972 and the development of the KF in 1971–72. For this purpose, I analyse Maoist publications from 1966–72 and parts of the literature distributed by the KF in 1972. I use the above-mentioned publications and a number of other texts and memoirs on the women's politics in *ml-bevegelsen*. This story will be approached from two perspectives: the former concentrating on KF's place in the universe of Norwegian Maoism and the relationship between its hermetic community and feminism, the latter considering KF's ideas in a broader temporal and spatial context, looking for its place in the long-term development of feminism in leftist movements. This research makes it possible to trace the relationship between a feminist initiative and the political movement alongside which it arose. As such it provides possibilities for a broader comparative perspective.

2. WOMEN'S POLITICS IN NORWAY IN THE 1960S

In 1945–65, the tone of Norwegian politics was set by the social democratic Norwegian Workers' Party (nor. *Det Norske Arbeiderparti*, DNA). This period went down in history as the era of consolidation of the welfare state. The Social Democrats implemented extensive social and economic reforms, but their policies did not bring solutions in every area of society. This includes, among others, gender equality – the distinction between female housewives and male breadwinners prevailed in the family model stabilised after World War II. Given the economic growth, this phenomenon is referred to as the "housewives' paradise" (Hagemann 2020). Both in social and political life in 1960s Norway, male dominance was significant.

As a result, from the end of the 1950s the feminists' main demand was gender equality in working and political life, expressed through the characteristic concept of *likestilling*. Riding the wave of the educational boom of the 1960s, women became better educated and were able to take up paid work, which led to a clash with the existing values of the "housewives' paradise." As early as 1949 a government commission on equal pay was established, with little effect. The sign of change came 10 years later when Norway ratified the ILO Equal Pay Convention. At the dawn of the 1960s, trade unions and the employers' federation

[1] Throughout the article, uppercase letters are used while referring to the Norwegian group called New Feminists, while lowercase letters signify 1960s new feminism as a whole.

reached an agreement to implement the ILO conventions. The DNA soon decided to go along with the stream of change by including *likestilling* in its programme in 1965 (Lønnå 2017).

During the 1967 municipal elections, a committee was set up to campaign for increased participation of women in local government. It was led by former Prime Minister and DNA chairman Einar Gerhardsen and the incumbent right-wing Prime Minister Per Borten from Centre Party (nor. *Senterpartiet*, Sp), which made the initiative cross-political. The committee campaigned for use of the so-called cumulative voting method, which allowed voters to cast more than one vote in local elections. The campaign succeeded in increasing the proportion of women in local government from 6.4 to 9.5%, but it was also an important signal sent by political leaders. Four years later, the initiative was repeated by a coalition of feminist organisations. The results were significant: women's participation in government increased to 14.8%, while in Asker, Oslo and Trondheim they won the majority of seats. The experience of women activists who had benefited from the "cumulative actions" was ambiguous, but the campaign's success marked the beginning of a long-term increase in women's participation in political bodies (Eriksen 2017:203–208).

The second key aspect in the debate on women's rights was the question of liberalising the right to abortion. The 1960 law permitted abortion in three cases: pregnancy as a result of rape, or danger to the life of either the mother or the fetus. Any request had to be examined individually by a commission (nor. *abortnemnd*) consisting of two doctors. The breakthrough in the fight for the right to abortion on demand was the inclusion of this push for liberalisation in the DNA programme in 1969. Soon the issue became the main demand of feminist movements in a political struggle that lasted several years. It ended with the legalisation of abortion on demand up to the 12th week of pregnancy in 1978. The 1960s brought also a revolution in contraception. In 1967 contraceptive pills were allowed to be sold, although initially they were not trusted and popular among Norwegian women (Lilleslåtten 2017)

In the late 1960s, new feminist movements that were grounded in global social changes emerged in Norway. However, the history of organised struggle for women's rights in Norway dates back to the late 19th century, when the Norwegian Women's Rights Association (nor. *Norsk Kvinnesaksforening*, NKF) was founded. After World War II, NKF was primarily involved in the struggle for equality in working life and politics. During and after the interwar period, the Communist Party-affiliated Norwegian Women's Union (nor. *Norsk Kvinneforbund*, under this name since 1954) had been active, but fell into crisis at the end of the 1960s (Lønnå 2020). Women's organisations were also traditionally active in the DNA, but during the "housewives' paradise" period they were focused on fighting for the interests of housewives. Changes in the organisation were at a similar rate to those within the party. In addition, there were organisations representing the interests of particular groups, such as female scientists or farmers.

Out of these new movements, the first to gather with specific intent were the New Feminists, a radical movement that took its inspiration from the American Women's Liberation Movement and local initiatives such as the Breastfeeding Support Group (nor. *Ammehjelpen*), founded in 1969 (Gulli 2003). The development of the New Feminist movement in Norway is described as beginning in the autumn of 1970. The founding moments were a lecture by the American feminist Jo Freeman at the University of Oslo in September of that year, and an organised intrusion on the radio programme *Women, Women* hosted by Rolf Kirkvaag two months later (Korsvik 2020:22). The New Feminists broke with the earlier and negatively-regarded struggle for equality by actively advocating for "liberation of women" from male oppression. They operated as an informal network of discussion groups focusing on the exchange of experiences and awareness-raising (nor. *bevisstgjøring*). They preached the need for an individual approach to oppression and liberation, while proclaiming that "the private is political." A second pillar of their activity was direct action in the form of

pickets and happenings. A characteristic feature of this new feminism was a horizontal structure without leaders or political bodies. Each member had an equal right to vote in internal elections, and spontaneous organisation was valued above hierarchy. The New Feminists represented a new iteration of the struggle for women's rights in Norway, but they did not develop all the ideas and practices shared by second-wave feminists around the world.

3. THE ORIGINS OF *ML-BEVEGELSEN*

The roots of the Norwegian Maoist movement can be traced back to 1965 and the activism of left-wing youth from the eastern districts of Oslo. Within a few years they dominated the Socialist Youth League[2] (nor. *Sosialistisk Ungdomsforbund*, SUF) and the Norwegian Solidarity Committee for Vietnam (nor. *Solidaritetskomiteen for Vietnam*, Solkom).[3] Taking advantage of the popularity of radical activism during the global "year 1968," the Maoists acquired several thousand activists and created branches throughout the whole country. The *ml-bevegelsen* consisted of multiple political entities, which focused on such aspects as international solidarity, student activism and culture.

The Maoist-dominated SUF broke with the socialist party in 1969. This marked the beginning of communist party building, which lasted until the Workers' Communist Party (nor. *Arbeidernes Kommunistparti* (*marxist-leninistene*), AKP(m-l)) was founded in February 1973. The party was intended to consist of an "enlightened proletariat" capable of carrying out a socialist revolution. In practice this intention proved overly optimistic. Their biggest problem was the failure to encourage agitation among the most important beneficiaries of the desired revolution – the workers. The Maoists failed despite their highly visible involvement in illegal strikes (the tradition of which, inspired by the revolting miners from Swedish Kiruna, began to be restored after decades of social democratic stability) and protests against EEC accession, which united thousands of Norwegians in the struggle to maintain their, as they believed, threatened sovereignty. They tried to increase support by forming "united fronts" centred on particular political issues, such as the abovementioned anti-EEC campaign. Nevertheless, despite their political failures, the Maoists managed to make a lasting mark on areas such as student culture and literature throughout the 1970s.[4] One year before the party was founded, the wide world of Norwegian Maoism expanded to include a "united front" for women.

4. "LESS VISIBLE" – THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE FORMATION OF *ML-BEVEGELSEN*

In his autobiographical book written in 1985, Pål Steigan, one of the leaders of the Norwegian Maoist movement and chairman of the AKP(m-l) in 1975–84, noted this:

> We considered ourselves very progressive. It was only much later that I realised that the environment actually functioned oppressively for girls. The girls did key jobs to build the team, but it was always the boys who were most visible (Steigan 1985:50).[5]

Indeed, despite the widespread activity of women in Maoist youth and solidarity organisations, there was not a gender balance among the elites of these groups. Nevertheless, the

[2] Overtaken in 1969, SUF was the youth organisation of Socialist People's Party (nor. *Sosialistisk Folkeparti*, SF).

[3] Overtaken in 1967.

[4] Among the dozens of writers associated with *ml-bevegelsen* one can find names such as Dag Solstad, Espen Haavardsholm or Jon Michelet.

[5] All translations from Norwegian throughout the paper are mine (MG).

involvement of women activists was crucial from the very beginning of the Maoist movement, as exemplified by the activity of Esther Bergerud, a kind of "godmother" of Norwegian Maoism, who was one of the first in the country to promote this ideology while running a communist bookshop Oslo Bok- og Papirhandel (Røed 2019).

Women were also present in the movement's youth wing from the very beginning. In 1963, Grete Letting Olsen became chairwoman of the SUF branch in the Oslo-Bryn district, which became the core of the Maoist movement. Soon afterwards Jorun Guldbrandsen became one of the key activists in the radicalised elite of the district. She was also a member of the board of Solkom after the Maoist "coup" in the autumn of 1967. Women's voices were heard in the fiery debates about the future of the movement in the magazine *Ungsosialisten* (eng. Young Socialist), where, among others, the future author Toril Brekke spoke (*Ungsosialisten* 1968:30–31). Kitty Strand, a medical student who in the 1970s became one of the leaders of the movement fighting for the right to expanded abortion rights, is another example illustrating the presence of women among the Maoist leaders.[6] Equally involved in Maoist politics was psychology graduate and poet Kjersti Ericsson, who was later chairman of the AKP(m-l) from 1984 to 1988.

Nevertheless, until 1971 women's participation in *ml-bevegelsen* was most visible in the actions of individuals, and women activists did not form their own committees or media. Women's politics were rarely discussed in the Maoist press. For example, in *Ungsosialisten* published in 1967–69 this topic appeared once, in the form of a reprint of Enver Hoxha's text (Hoxha 1969). In *Klassekampen* (eng. Class Struggle), on the other hand, the problem of wage inequality was noted, but one cannot say that the feminist perspective became an important part of Maoist analysis (*Klassekampen* 1969:5). Feminist themes were also absent from the summer camps that had formed a centrepiece of the Maoist youth movement since 1967.

5. THE BEGINNINGS OF WOMEN'S FRONT

In 1971, significant changes occurred in how the role of women was viewed in *ml-bevegelsen*. At the same time, *ml-bevegelsen*'s place within the broader women's movement began to change too. The breakthrough came with a lecture on the oppression of women in capitalist society given by Wenche Hjellum during a meeting of the Red Front (nor. *Rød Front*, RF) at the University of Oslo in autumn 1971. Significantly, Hjellum did not have her background in the dominant academic centre of *ml-bevegelsen* in Oslo, but in Bergen, where she had already been involved in women's politics as president of the student council in 1967 (*Kilden* 2019).

The lecture fell on fertile intellectual ground and the participants decided to set up a new organisation supporting a radical view of women's politics. They began by forming groups called "women's fronts" (nor. *kvinnefronter*). These were mainly composed of Marxist-Leninists associated with Maoist thought and non-affiliated socialists. The "women's fronts" soon started to organise meetings and political actions. The first demands were to improve access to kindergartens on the campus and to improve the working and living conditions of female university employees such as cleaners, cooks and office workers (Haukaa 1982:36). The Maoist movement's leaders did not fail to notice the feminist awakening among students, especially as the concerns of women also began to surface at local meetings of the opponents of accession to the European Economic Community. The need for an organisation specifically for women was clarified a few months later, during a Christmas meeting at which Strand and Ericsson, among others, were present (Steigan 1985:138).

[6] Strand, together with Gro Hagemann, was the editor of the 1972 *Røde Fane* number about women's politics, which will be an important part of the further analysis.

Meanwhile, ideological differences were growing between the Marxist-Leninist-dominated fronts and the New Feminists. These were fully expressed during the joint 8 March demonstration, during which the New Feminists presented culturally radical slogans such as "No to motherhood," "I want to be on top" and "No to forced fucking" (Haukaa 1982:83). These slogans were seen by women's fronts' activists as making their cause vulnerable to ridicule, but the most important conflict regarded defining the main enemy in the struggle for women's liberation. According to the New Feminists, oppression was the result of the patriarchal structures and men were the principal opponents of women. Marxist-Leninists, on the other hand, sought to avoid antagonising either sex, affirming the belief that gender discrimination and patriarchy would be abolished in the course of the workers' struggle against the capital (Rønning 2005:203). While the New Feminists saw the traditional family as an instrument of oppression, the Maoists saw it as an important social cell that should be liberated from capitalism and patriarchy. The socialists within the fronts were a kind of middle ground between the conflicted New Feminists and Marxist-Leninists (Haukaa 1982:80).

Several months of organisational work culminated in a national conference in Oslo on 19 March 1972. Around 200 delegates from all over the country attended the conference (Haukaa 1982:36). Two declarations, organisational and political, came as the outcome. It was decided to build a mass organisation, open to all women affected by discrimination. The founders were inspired by the idea of "united fronts," which had a long tradition in European communism and formed the basis of Maoist activism in 1969–73. It was believed that members of this united organisation, known as The Women's Front (nor. *Kvinnefronten*, KF), should be able to act in accordance with their interests and abilities. Political affiliation was put in the background, as pluralism was seen as the way to create a universal perspective on the oppression of women. They aimed at mass activism, which acted not only as a political goal but also as means in the struggle for women's emancipation. A board responsible for the implementation of an agreed KF policy was to be elected at the next founding congress. This structure was an innovation as compared to the existing New Feminist movement, which was characterised by a lack of hierarchy. Marxist-Leninists did not believe that a flat hierarchy had emancipatory potential and saw hierarchy as an opportunity to organise and direct the political struggle (Haukaa 1982:91). Unity was seen as the strength of the organisation.

The KF began to rapidly gain adherents across the country. In her memoirs, Hjellum notes that one of the reasons for the growing interest in the new initiative was the search for a "more political" and, more specifically, a more communal alternative to the New Feminists who were "focused more on making individual women aware" (Ryste 2003). KF provided such a community, and the model of combining discussion with radical activism had been tried and tested in earlier Maoist initiatives. One of the first opportunities for political engagement was the 1 May celebrations. KF activists chose not to join the Communist Bloc, demonstrating the political pluralism within the organisation. It was pointed out that the organisation aimed to conduct "women's struggle instead of party politics" (Rønning 2005:204). At that time, it included members not only of left-wing organisations and parties, but also female politicians from the liberal *Venstre* and the agrarian Sp. The following months were a period of developing structures and educational activities, carried out in the shadow of the campaign against EEC accession. Nonetheless, activists conducted autonomous actions, as in the case of protests against the display of advertisements considered sexist in Oslo cinemas. It is noteworthy that these cinema actions were carried out together with the New Feminists, who could be seen as political opponents, but in fact often turned out to be important activist allies (*Oppbrudd* 1972:3).

6. A FEMINIST BREAKTHROUGH? FEMINISM IN MAOIST POLITICS 1971/72

The role of grassroots activism which resulted in the formation of the KF was reflected in an increased interest in feminism in the Maoist press from mid-1971 onwards. Articles published during this period included both Marxist analyses of the situation of women in Norway and female perspectives on *ml-bevegelsen* from below. The most interesting example of the latter is an article written by "a group employed in a 'typically female' occupation" published in the internal journal *Tjen Folket* (eng. Serve the People) (*Tjen Folket* 1972a:24–25).

The authors suggested that the fight against discrimination should begin the eradication of sexist tendencies present in the organisation. They began their text with an attack on the "bourgeois view of women" that they saw as permeating left-wing groups. As a major problem, they identified the systematic denial that women possessed skills in leadership and organising, an issue later admitted by Steigan. The tendency to see female activists as simply "bed comrades" and to seek personal and sexual relationships within the organisation was sharply criticised. The increasing organisation of women was said to be undermined by jokes about radical feminism and a lack of interest in it, in contrast with the Vietnam War or the EEC. Another problem was the disdain for "women's issues," which were perceived as mundane as well as the recognition only of those women who had won their political position by following the "male path." The authors' point of view was by no means overtly radical in the context of feminist critique at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s – rather, it presented the Maoist movement as a part of a global trend. If we take their voice as representative of a larger number of Maoist women, this article illustrates that the internal problems of this movement are deeply rooted in the era in which it was founded.

In the spring of 1972, the liberation of women was the focus of an issue of the theoretical journal *Røde Fane* (eng. The Red Banner). This journal consisted of political texts, social analyses and reprints from "befriended" China and Albania. Eastern inspirations were an important part of the Maoists' ideological formation. The feminist imagination of Mao – not necessarily an accurate representation – was expressed in the words of activist Lu Yu-lan, originally published in March 1972 in the *Peking Review* (*Røde Fane* 1972:39–42). Her story was an idyllic vision of the feminist gains of the Chinese Revolution. These successes were surprisingly similar to the challenges faced by women in Norway – the issue of housewives, the equal division of labour and pay and the question of women's participation in politics. A second great role model was Hoxha's Albania, which this time, through an excerpt from the *History of the Communist Party of Albania*, was presented as the arena of a 30-year leap from "Mohammedan and mediaeval traditions" to a position of global leadership in the struggle for women's liberation (*Røde Fane* 1972:42). The Chinese-inspired policy of revolutionization was supposed to mark another step on the still long path to full liberation, although the Albanian bans on abortion and contraception were not mentioned in this context.

The comprehensive use of statistics and research in the articles on women's welfare in Norway during this period is noteworthy. Attention was also paid to the scale of unpaid work performed by housewives and the impact of capitalism on family relations (*Røde Fane* 1972:7–30). The vision of Maoist involvement in the women's movement was clearly stated. The introductory article called for a struggle against the dual oppression of women – by capital and by patriarchy (*Røde Fane* 1972:4–6). The existence of a communist party was not perceived as a sufficient step in the struggle for women's rights – women should form their own organisation as well. The conclusion was in line with the earlier voice of *Tjen folket* – the Maoists were to fight discrimination against women by actively tackling it within their ranks and co-founding a new mass women's movement.

The feminist perspective also gained importance in *ml-bevegelsen*'s most important political project in 1971–72 – the struggle against Norway's accession to the EEC, which was to be put to a referendum in September 1972. The Workers' Committee against the EEC and Inflation (nor. *Arbeiderkomiteen mot EEC og dyrtid*, AKMED) played a central role in the Maoist campaign. As within other groups, women's politics emerged as an issue within AKMED at the turn of 1971 and 1972, resulting in its inclusion in the main demands of the movement and the organisation of a "women's conference" on 13 February 1972. Moreover, the voice and initiative of women was emphasised in published materials (e.g. "we, women" *Felles kamp* 1972b:3). The referendum was seen as an important opportunity to manifest women's involvement in national politics.

Three reasons were put forward in support of women's involvement (*Felles kamp* 1972a:4). The first one was the need to follow up on the success of the "cumulative actions." Since there was already tangible proof that women's mobilisation made sense, it was a natural next step to get women involved in the European campaign. Secondly, the inclusion of women in the anti-EEC struggle was also intended as a demonstration of their strength against a political establishment that ignored women's issues and tended to ridicule feminist objections to accession. The third reason was that the Maoists saw the EEC as a real threat to women. This threat, in turn, had two faces. The first was inflation, central to AKMED's initial rhetoric. The abolition of customs barriers and the opening up of the common market was expected to mean that prices for necessities would rise, which in turn was seen as a threat to the welfare of housewives (*Felles kamp* 1972a:7–10). There were also fears of increases in housing and transport prices associated with the process of centralisation of services. Integration into the European economy, on the other hand, posed a threat to women in industry – there were fears of both mass lay-offs in the textile industry, which was not competitive compared to Europe, and the displacement of women in small and medium-sized trade by international supermarket chains (*EEC – en trussel mot kvinnene* 1972:5).

AKMED activists did not believe that success was likely in the European struggle for equal pay as embodied in Article 199 of the Treaties of Rome. They saw Norway as a country that, despite its many flaws, was in the continental vanguard of the struggle for equality, and accession to the EEC could derail progress in the fight for *likestilling* (*EEC – en trussel mot kvinnene* 1972:7). A report on women's employment in EEC member states, prepared by French sociologist Évelyne Sullerot for the European Commission, played a major role in the rhetoric of the protesters. Sullerot's research uncovered such issues as the low employment of women and gender-based wage inequalities in particular EEC member countries despite the ratification of the Treaties. The importance of the report in the negative campaign was underpinned by an aura of secrecy resulting from accusations that the applicant states, in particular Denmark and Norway, attempted to conceal the report (*Røde Fane* 1972:48).

This economic approach to women's politics was occasionally backed up by references to the reactionary nature of European societies, which were dominated by a vision of the ideal woman as an "obedient and passive" housewife (*EEC – en trussel mot kvinnene* 1972:10). Undoubtedly, however, the main focus of the anti-EEC campaign was the economy, and the way in which women's issues were addressed was, to some extent, in keeping with the conservative character that AKMED took on over time. Paradoxically, in an agitation based on a growing sense of threat, there was no room for demands that empowered women. The emancipatory nature of the struggle against the EEC was therefore seen in the mobilisation of women in protests which focused on issues directly affecting them.

Thus feminism, virtually non-existent in Maoist politics in the summer of 1971, was already a constant subject of debate and agitation by the spring of 1972. Two factors contributed to this. The first one was the grassroots activity of women both in existing organisations and in women's fronts. Secondly, the Maoists urgently needed to broaden their

appeal and create a social base ready to support their policies. The coincidence of the success of their association with the campaign against the EEC, as well as the beginnings of the KF, made the women's movement a natural target for their expansion.

7. WOMEN'S FRONT'S POSTULATES

The first KF keynote programme was announced at the March conference and later clarified in the brochure *Om kvinnefronten*. Initially, it was based on twelve demands as a starting point for internal discussions (*Om kvinnefronten* 1972:7–8). The slogan adopted was "Fight against all oppression of women – for the liberation of women!" Thus, like the New Feminists, the KF activists shifted the political focus from the fight for equality to the fight for women's liberation. Only the definition of the "main enemy" was distinctive. It should be noted here that both the Maoists and the KF groups avoided using the term "feminism," writing consequently about the women's question, women's liberation, etc.

Two main tendencies can be distinguished in this programme. The first one sought to provide solutions to current problems faced by women (in practice – housewives). The second one concerned the development of a socio-economic system based on gender equality (or "women's liberation"). In addition, the programme included two demands that are difficult to qualify unambiguously, but which were to mark the two crucial directions of the KF activism in the 1970s. The well-known demand to fight against the rise in prices of groceries and housing was part of the first trend. The rising cost of living forced some women to seek additional earnings despite the lack of nursery places and the precarious situation in the labour market (*Om kvinnefronten* 1972:3–4). There was also an unspecified demand for an increase of child benefit, which was previously increased in 1970. The last of the current, and (in a sense) retrospective, demands was the call for "full pension and social security rights." These demands were largely intended to compensate for the problems arising from the shortcomings of the existing welfare state, an idea to which the Maoists were opposed. Moreover, it was feared that further economic growth would strengthen the dominant family model, reinforcing the position of the male as the sole breadwinner. Deep transformations were needed to reverse this tendency, the nature of which was outlined in the second type of claims.

The first point in the programme concerned equal right and opportunity to work and access to education. The emphasis here was placed on equal opportunity rather than equal rights. Deep gender inequalities manifested as early as in the education system and the content of school textbooks were pointed out as well. The second demand concerned "equal pay for equal work." The Maoists had a negative view of what had been achieved so far in the field of equal pay, and they backed their views with precise statistics. A lot of attention was paid to the double burden of women pursuing professional careers (*Om kvinnefronten* 1972:6–7). The demands included the development of services enabling women to free themselves from the traditional duties of a housewife and a call for an equal division of household responsibilities between a woman and a man.[7] It was pointed out, however, that part of this change must come from women themselves, who must learn to believe in themselves, take responsibility and manage their life decisions (*Om kvinnefronten* 1972:10).

The Maoists and the KF activists both drew attention to the "invisibility" of the housewife from the perspective of the labour market. The phenomenon of the double burden faced by women in unpaid work was not a new discovery on the Left, but it had been popularised in the 1970s thanks to, among other things, the analyses of the Danish economist Ester Boserup (Benería 1999:287–309). A lot of attention was paid to expanding infrastructure, from

[7] This was the only case of combining a socio-economic demand with a vision of radical and rather grassroots cultural change.

maternity wards to nurseries and kindergartens. The KF demanded the universal accessibility of infrastructure, which was not obvious given the geography of Norway and was connected to the long-lasting struggle against centralisation expressed also by the AKMED.

Two demands do not fit clearly into the division proposed above. The first of these concerned the full right to contraception and abortion, and the connected demand to introduce education about contraception. This was not a revolutionary demand in view of the fact that the DNA had been advocating for legal abortion on demand since 1969. The second one was "No to Women as Merchandise," which marked the beginning of a long and ultimately ineffective struggle against pornography. In 1972 the arguments against the objectification of the female body mainly concerned the advertising industry, in which women served as an incentive to buy cigarettes, tractors or cars (*Om kvinnefronten* 1972:7). The sexist trope of advertisements depicting women as spendthrifts was also pointed out. Neither this perspective was a novelty to the new feminist movements in Norway – the objectification of the female body in the advertising industry was commented on by Jo Freeman during her 1970 visit to Norway (Haukaa 1982:54).

This programme, however vague and incomplete, made it possible to define KF's place within Norwegian feminism. The organisation's ideology was dominated by social issues. The communal goods of nurseries, maternity wards and fair taxes were contrasted with the individualistic and cultural ideas of the New Feminists.

8. THE LAST PREPARATIONS

The structure of "women's fronts" were based on many local and thematic groups, focusing on issues such as EEC, kindergartens or culture (*Om kvinnefronten* 1972:1–2). Local activities included the exchange of experiences, self-education and a vigorous search for new activists. The distribution of the newsletter *Kvinnefront* and the discussions around its contents were an important part of the activities. However, the strength of KF was most visible in their going beyond discussions – members were encouraged to plan political actions and put them into practice. Discussions and leaflet distribution were accepted as a beginning, but they should have led to street actions and protests aimed at promoting the KF demands. Unlike the New Feminists, KF founders saw activism as a path to liberation (*Om kvinnefronten* 1972:14–15). They stressed the importance of local activism and organising at the workplace – members were encouraged to raise the issue of unequal pay. The brochure *Om kvinnefronten* collected examples of recent women's labour struggles. As in many other aspects of Maoist activity, Norwegian Marxist-Leninists looked up to the achievements of their Swedish neighbours, in this case praising the protests against inflation (*Om kvinnefronten* 1972:11). At the same time, Marxism-Leninism itself was, in accordance with founding ideas, carefully hidden in the background, although the recommended readings included Engels, Lenin, Kollontai, and the above-mentioned issue of *Røde Fane* (*Om kvinnefronten* 1972:16–17).

Shortly before the founding congress, an article reflecting *ml-bevegelsen*'s ideas and hopes for the new organisation was published in *Tjen Folket* (1972b:28–30). The author saw the KF as an organisation built by Marxist-Leninists, the success of which was to be of importance to the whole communist movement. According to her, the KF should adopt a political programme based on simple demands targeting women with different political views and experiences. However, the inclusiveness of this vision was limited as the New Feminist struggle against the traditional model of marriage was explicitly described as unacceptable. The "sectarian" New Feminist branches were also excluded from the vision of broad cooperation within women's politics. This dualism somewhat foreshadowed the later

Maoist domination in the KF. In the meantime, however, the goals and "contradictions" were specified and the KF was ready to be established as a political body.

The Kvinnefronten was officially founded at the congress held on 2 and 3 December 1972. 200 delegates from 22 local branches attended the congress (Rønning 2005:204). In line with the earlier vision, no direct references to socialism or class struggle were included in the programme. Membership was open to everyone, also the New Feminists – dual membership was even a popular practice, and some hoped to pull their colleagues over to the side of socialist feminism. As planned, a 21-member National Board (nor. *landsutvalg*) was elected to govern the organisation between the annual congresses. Soon, the first nationwide actions commenced, centred on issues including the right to abortion on demand, reduction of VAT on foodstuffs, expansion of nursery care and equal pay for men and women (Rønning 2005:205). In addition, KF organised discussion groups and educational seminars (Schanke 1973:9). The number of KF members in 1973 was between 3,000 and 4,000, 1,000 of whom were concentrated in the most active Oslo branch. In total, structures were created in 125 locations (*Kilden* 2019).

In February 1973 KF's efforts became an important basis for women's postulates in the program of the newly founded Maoist Party. Moreover, a principle of filling at least one third of seats in the party's Central Committee with women was adopted during the founding congress in line with the idea of promoting "workers and women" to leading positions (AKP(m-l) 1974:5). The issue of women's liberation was echoed in both the party platform and the program for the 1973 elections. In the former, the Maoists heralded the "long struggle" for economic and social gender equality. "Bourgeois" family roles and the "rotten" imperialist view of women were to be abolished in favour of the freedom to take up work and participate fully in social, political and cultural life (AKP(m-l) 1974:32). The latter program contained further ideas for equality in the workplace and support for women's employment through the expansion of the day care network. Significant attention was paid to both the struggle for higher wages in "typically female occupations" and the struggle against the conceptualization of particular occupations as "typically female." The economic demands were accompanied by a call to ban pornography and the use of women in advertising (AKP(m-l) 1974:56).

9. CONCLUSIONS

This analysis can be considered as part of the history of the Maoist movement as well as the feminist movement. KF emerged from the needs of radical female students at the University of Oslo, which soon turned out to be the same needs shared by a broader group of Norwegian women. Their initiative introduced feminism into the political universe of the Maoists, who were previously uninvolved in women's politics. And although the political voice of women was heard and sometimes decisive in the early development of *ml-bevegelsen*, the assumption of gender equality in the movement would be far from correct. The acceleration in 1971 was due to several factors – undoubtedly the Maoists needed feminism as they aimed to build a mass movement, and the conjuncture reached a critical point with the successes of the New Feminists and the growing role of the women's voices in the anti-EEC campaign.

Formally, the KF was not a Maoist organisation, as it was founded jointly by Marxist-Leninists, New Feminists and socialists. This fact paved the way for a feminist programme based on women's experiences. Although the Maoists had certain political expectations of the KF, the idea of a united front freed the organisation from the dogmatism that had come to the fore in many other *ml-bevegelsen*'s projects. On the other hand, the experiences of Maoist

activism, an important phenomenon from 1967 onwards, provided the Marxist-Leninists with the knowledge and tools needed to build the organisation efficiently. Due to the female-centric nature of KF, the established structures of *ml-bevegelsen*, relying on repeated and usually male names, were unable to dominate and control it. Over the years the dynamics of internal relations within the KF and the KF's relationship with the Maoist party became a cause of conflict, but at the outset the project was an example of the success of front politics. The KF emerged as a doubly grassroots phenomenon – both as a broad social movement and as a group operating within the broad Maoist movement. This perspective reveals the subversive potential of women's activism within traditional politics.

The second field in which the KF can be placed is the history of Norwegian and European feminism. The emergence of a new feminist movement based on Marxist critiques was not unique, as Trine Rogg Korsvik has shown in her comparative analysis of the Norwegian and French feminist movements in the context of the struggle against pornography (2020). As the idea of Marxist feminism was strongly rooted in the history of the left, KF activists could, besides keeping up with current trends, also refer to Clara Zetkin or Alexandra Kollontai (the latter directly influenced the Norwegian left in the 1910s and 1920s). In this respect it is difficult to see the KF as an avant-garde organisation if we consider its ideas and solutions. As I have tried to demonstrate, many of the movement's focal demands emerged in local and global feminist discourse long before its formation. What made KF unique in the Norwegian context was the integration of social and cultural demands into a coherent programme that reached beyond the *likestilling*. In other words, the breakthrough in local politics carried by KF was deeply embedded in the global experience of women's politics. Their strength lay also in the potential to integrate a broad spectrum of Norwegian women, although the idea of building an organisation uniting all the women remained a dream.

Although it is difficult to find demands which paint as the KF ahead of its time, reflecting now, fifty years later, the continued relevance of some concepts, such as the unpaid work of women, the commercial exploitation of the female body or the reflection on the search for "bed companions" in leftist organisations, is remarkable. Perhaps it was the grassroots view of women's politics, which was not strictly subject to the doctrine of Maoist Marxism-Leninism, that proved to be the most timeless ideological contribution of the Maoists to Norwegian politics. While their fascination with Chinese communism did not stand the humanitarian test of time, and their diagnoses of the welfare state in the 1960s, even if correct, are inevitably outdated today, the KF's programme contained a surprising number of demands whose relevance reaches far beyond their specific temporal and national context. The history of the KF, specifically the story of its origins, has relevance not only as a study of a certain phenomenon that happened five decades ago, but also as a timeless contribution to reflections on the dynamics of women's politics inside and outside the left.

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